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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: CHITTAGONG CANDIDATES WITH CHECKERED PASTS SEEK
REDEMPTION AS VOTERS REMAIN WARY OF VIOLENCE

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) A recent trip to six constituencies in Bangladesh's Chittagong Division revealed cautious optimism that security forces would be able to contain election related violence. Given the checkered past of some candidates, there are concerns about possible vote-rigging and minority voter intimidation. The role of money has been diminished but not eliminated as candidates skirt restrictions on campaign spending. Most interlocutors regarded the December 18 deployment of the army in support of the elections as a positive development.

FAMILY FEUDING IN CHITTAGONG-5

12. (C) In mid-December, Emboffs visited constituencies in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar and spoke with a range of interlocutors about the upcoming elections. The two candidates for Chittagong-5's parliamentary seat are cousins Giasuddin Quader Chowdhury and Fazlee Karim Chowdhury, who share ownership in ancestral property in the longtime family political fiefdom. Both have previously been elected to Parliament, Giasuddin with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Fazlee with the Awami League (AL). The two share a deep enmity, which they freely expressed to Emboffs during separate interviews. Complicating matters is Giassudin's bitter relationship with his elder brother Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, a shipping magnate, former BNP MP, and senior adviser to party Chairperson Khaleda Zia. Notwithstanding Fazlee's AL affiliation, Giassudin alleged that his elder brother was aiding his opponent, adding, "He is doing this quite openly." Fazlee acknowledged that his elder cousin was supporting him but dismissed the support. "He is doing it because he needs me, now he is weak in the party. He needs me, I don't need him," he asserted.

ON VIOLENCE, VOTER INTIMIDATION AND STATE OF EMERGENCY

13. (C) "They are bad men," said Fazlee, speaking passionately of his two cousins. "They have blood on their hands." He predicted dramatically that he was "sure" he would be killed by his cousin before the campaign was over. Chittagong-5 and its neighboring constituencies are some of the most violent areas in Bangladesh, having witnessed severe clashes between party supporters and widespread criminal activity. Over the last four years things have been cleaned up considerably, residents said, largely thanks to the actions of the Rapid Action Battalion, Bangladesh's paramilitary counter-terrorism force. Both candidates, however, continued to view the political process through the prism of potential violence. In contrast, residents in the more remote and rural district

of Cox's Bazar, which contains four constituencies, dismissed such fears.

¶4. (C) AL candidates in urban Chittagong constituencies which house significant minority Hindu populations also expressed fear of violence. Hindu voters generally support the more avowedly secular Awami League. The Quader Chowdhury family earned its reputation for violence during Bangladesh's Liberation War, when it allied with the Pakistani occupation forces and was accused of participating in war crimes. The AL candidates urged international observers to pay close attention to the potential for problems in this area.

¶5. (C) When asked about the government's December 17 lifting of the state of emergency, residents of Cox's Bazar and in rural Chittagong constituencies claimed the Emergency had made little difference in their lives. On the other hand, BNP candidate for Chittagong-12 Sarwar Jamal Nizam said he and his campaign workers had feared arrest and "persecution" while the emergency was in force and felt unable to fully and actively seek voters' support. At the same time, interlocutors expressed relief that the army would deploy immediately after the lifting of the state of emergency. Rural voters seemed more confident that no elections violence would ensue, but none would completely rule out the possibility.

TRADING ACCUSATIONS OF BALLOT-STUFFING

¶6. (C) Both Chittagong-5 candidates accused the other of vote-rigging. Giassudin said he lost the 2001 election after

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his cousin's supporters commandeered a series of polling centers, overwhelming and intimidating elections staff and then engaging in ballot-stuffing. Fazlee leveled the same charge in reverse, citing very lop-sided results in Giassudin's favor in some polling centers in 2001. Residents and civil society representatives in the area told Emboffs that both sides engaged in ballot-stuffing during the 1996 and 2001 elections. Emboffs heard similar allegations from both major candidates in Chittagong-12 and Chittagong-14. Curiously, this appeared to be a non-issue in Cox's Bazar. All sides urged the Embassy and international observers to be alert to such activity in the coming election.

OBSERVING (OR NOT) CAMPAIGN SPENDING LIMITS

¶7. (C) In an effort to level the electoral playing field, the Bangladesh Elections Commission decreed that no candidate could spend more than 5 taka (approx USD 7 cents) per voter, up to a maximum of 1.5 million taka (approx USD 21,500) for the entire two-week campaign. While those in Cox's Bazar expressed few concerns in this regard, those in the Chittagong 5, 12 and 14 constituencies were eager to accuse opponents of abuses. In Chittagong-5, for example, Fazle bitterly listed extravagant campaign practices by his cousin (hiring taxis to transport supporters; micro-buses with loudspeakers to disseminate campaign rhetoric; and bribes large and small to officials) which he said proved Giassudin had already flagrantly violated this rule with more than 10 days of the campaign remaining.

¶8. (C) Giassudin candidly told Emboffs he thought the spending restrictions were ludicrous. Simply sending a postcard requesting support to each of the 300,000 voters in his constituency would cost him 4 taka per postcard, for an overall total of 1.2 million taka (approx USD 17,000), he said. "We will all be spending much, much more and we will all be lying through our noses to make it look like we haven't," he observed.

THE ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN) OLD ABUSE IN NEW CLOTHES?

¶9. (C) Sarwar Jamal Nizam, the BNP candidate for Chittagong-12, spent 14 months in jail on corruption charges filed by the Caretaker Government. Released on bail in August, he said the multiple charges against him had since been dropped. Nizam spoke with extreme bitterness of his experience. Upon his arrest, his older son, a barrister, fled to Singapore, where he now remained practicing law. His wife and younger son had likewise left for Singapore. Following schooling problems in Singapore, the family was forced to enroll their son at a school in India. The expense of all this had been crippling, and the political and emotional effects had been just as devastating, Nizam said. "What kind of government can do that to a citizen?" he asked rhetorically.

¶10. (U) Other interlocutors) both candidates and civil society representatives - likewise expressed disappointment in the CTG anti-corruption campaign. Although the campaign had begun promisingly in 2007, it had all too soon descended into politicized abuse of the country's legal system. Indeed, filing cases against political opponents seems to be a time-honored practice in Bangladesh. Several candidates made casual reference to multiple cases) some corruption-related, some not) the CTG or individuals had filed against them. The young Awami League candidate for Cox's Bazar-4 constituency, for example, noted matter-of-factly that political opponents had filed 22 cases against him over the past few years, ranging from murder to acid-throwing to extortion. More than half have been dismissed to date and he expected the rest to follow suit. (Comment: While there may indeed be fire behind much of this smoke, the average Bangladeshi now appears readier to assume political abuse of the court system than to assume possible guilt on the part of the average defendant.)

THE SYMPATHY VOTE

¶11. (U) The politicization of the court system has had a tangible effect on Bangladeshi politics, notably with regard to the institution of sympathy voting. Salahuddin Ahmed, who won the Cox's Bazar-1 constituency in 2001 was convicted on corruption charges. His wife, Hasina Ahmed, is BNP's nominee for this election. Her tactic appeared to be to appeal to the sympathy vote. At a recent campaign rally, surrounded by

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male BNP party officials, she mechanically listed her husband's achievements in obtaining state funds for roads, bridges and other development projects) and therefore jobs) for constituents. His conviction has deprived her of a husband, her children of a father, and voters of a benefactor, she said. A vote for her was a vote for him. Although she spoke in rote fashion with no charisma, conviction or political experience, observers assured embosfs she stood a good chance at winning the seat.

¶12. (C) Neighboring Cox's Bazar-3 also witnessed sympathy voting in 2001, when the BNP candidate there died of a heart attack just three days before the election. His younger brother, Shahiduzzaman) a young engineer with no political background) ran in his place and won the seat with an landslide victory. "I did not have to do anything. They were all crying for my brother," he said. This time he is not the BNP candidate but running as an independent, banking on a mixture of the remnants of the sympathy vote and his actual accomplishments over the last five years.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) In general, despite the many concerns expressed, the mood among interlocutors was cautiously optimistic. While noone was willing to rule out the possibility of elections-related violence, most interlocutors regarded the

December 18 deployment of the army in support of the elections as a positive development. While voters to express support for the CTG's anti-corruption drive, local factors continue to influence voting patterns. During the August municipal elections, the Awami League mayoral candidate in Sylhet won a landslide victory despite being in jail throughout the campaign. He seemed to benefit from both a sympathy vote and the residual support engendered during his past terms in office. Candidates in Chittagong appear to be banking on a similar calculus.

MORIARTY